

# THE QUEEN OF MOTHS

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

James C. Burke

## THE QUEEN OF MOTHS

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*In memory of Lynette Ashby*

## NOTES

QUEEN OF MOTHS is a one act experimental play that addresses the topic of ethics in academia. It was written as a theatre competition piece, though it was never used for that purpose. Even so, the script requires no scenery, no lighting other than general illumination, and a few props. It is composed in one continuous act. Scenes with realistic dialogue are punctuated by the exchange of a chorus of students – the latter sections are composed in free verse.

In this play is set in the early-1970s. Dr. Jane Segal, a brilliant organic chemist and adjunct professor, breaks with protocol and conducts human subject research on herself. She has discovered that a plant from which she is extracting a compound to be used as an insecticide has seemingly useful psychotropic effects. She uses her findings to manipulate her tyrannical chairman, and the review committee. Jane is monomaniacal, egotistical, and often cruel – particularly to her graduate assistant that she calls Grub. As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that her sociopathic behavior can be attributed to her abuse of a tea made from the leaves of the plant. The antenarrative of the story reveals that she has been consuming this concoction ever since a shaman brought the plant to her attention during an expedition to the Amazon rainforest. As the plot progresses, Dr. Segal gradually loses touch with reality, and then goes insane.

The authorship of the rhyme used in this work, “Little bird with broken wing, cannot fly, cannot sing; worthless son of a bitch” is anonymous. I learned it from a music professor thirty years ago. He stated that he had learned it as a student. After a casual online search, I have found senior citizens who picked up the rhyme, or a variant, from their grandparents.

This work is the product of place and time. It was staged before a general audience in 1990 and 1993 in Wilmington, North Carolina. Wilmington, for most of its history, was the major port in the state, and the hub for several railroads. Serving as the corporate headquarters of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad until the mid-1950s, Wilmington's economy was connected to the company, directly or indirectly. After the ACL moved to Jacksonville, Florida, the business of the city nearly collapsed. Aided by urban flight during the 1960s, the historic downtown neighborhoods – replete with a fine collection of Italianate and Queen Anne houses – fell into ruin. During the 1970s, it was a wise course of action to get out of the downtown district before dark. By the 1980s, Downtown Wilmington was coming back to life as the result of a vigorous historic preservation plan. With the growth of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, the city became a “college town.” Finally, Wilmington became a center for commercial film production. All these factors contributed to the evolution of a lively community of students, actors, artists, and musicians living in the historic district. Rent was cheap, there were coffeehouse venues for art shows and performances, and the community was convivial. For theatrical productions, rehearsal space was abundant and often free. Actors, technicians, and musicians formed companies and mounted productions with small expense. Best of all, without financial constraints, there was room for experimental work. This period of creativity ended with the gentrification of the downtown historic district. A link to a production photograph can be found in the Wilmington Star News Collection in the Local History Division of the New Hanover County Public Library (<http://cdm16072.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15169coll1/id/1004/rec/1>).

The role of Dr. Segal was first performed by the late Lynette Ashby. A kind-hearted, witty, and extremely talented

theatre professional and visual artist, Ms. Ashby delivered a vivid performance of a character foreign to her nature. In tribute to her talent as an actress and director, and her general contributions to the arts of Wilmington, this work is dedicated to her memory.

## *Characters*

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DR. JANE SEGAL is an expert in organic chemistry working as an adjunct professor at a large research university. She has devoted most of her career isolating compounds for various plants from the Amazon rainforest. The leaves of one in particular have psychotropic properties; and when concentrated, produces a powerful neurotoxin which has the potential for development as an insecticide.

“GRUB” is a poor, but ambitious, graduate student from the chemistry department who was assigned to assist Dr. Segal. She is somewhat brash, but has an aversion to insects and dirt.

CHAIRMAN is an overbearing, pompous opportunist. He is intent upon profiting from Dr. Segal's discoveries. Even so, he has given her the most ill-equipped laboratory in which to undertake her research.

STUDENTS provide an ongoing commentary on academia, society, and human nature during the play. There must be at least four individuals.

The time is the early-1970s. The play was written for theatre in the round. The STUDENTS are mixed in with the audience. The performance length of this play is approximately one hour. Conceived as a theatre conference competition piece, the technical demands are minimal.

# THE QUEEN OF MOTHS

## A PLAY IN ONE ACT

### Scene 1

SETTING: The action takes place inside an ill-equipped laboratory at a research university at an undisclosed location.

AT RISE: DR. JANE SEGAL, an expert in organic chemistry and adjunct professor at the university, is testing a toxic compound that she isolated from an otherwise harmless plant from the Amazon rainforest. The leaves of this plant, when prepared like tea, are a stimulant that has a mild hallucinogenic effect. DR. SEGAL has been mounting specimens of some of the insects that she killed in her experiments with the compound. Her collection is a source of great pride and enjoyment.

DR. SEGAL

Ah... Dear Children,  
How lovely you remain in death.

Poor dears:

Do you miss your days of freedom?  
A needle through your back has made you silent.

I will remember for you:

The sun forever shines on you and your playmates-  
Crawling, Flying, spinning in Happiness!

In the suffocating atmosphere of an August noon  
A cotton-like egg case trembles in the web;  
Then Bursts!



SEGAL (cont.)

Eight hundred little legs propel you onward  
Into the world of Edibles

Lovely little legs... Running, Jumping,  
Crawling on my shoulder... Floating in a tea cup.

(SEGAL places the jar on the workbench.)

You will sleep, little innocents;  
You will sleep...

(SHE takes a dropper and fills it with the toxin. SHE hums as  
she draws the toxin from a bottle. SHE smiles, then empties  
the dropper into the glass funnel on the killing jar.)

One drop ...  
Two... Three drops.

Sleep.

(She smiles. The unseen moths are dying.)

So, it is:

The Mediocrities fill their bellies with the labor of others  
- They defoliate the fruitful spirit;  
Yet, in the end they fly into the flames,

Consumed in a Flash!

The committee, the damn committee;  
What is the committee to Me?

FIRST STUDENT (stands)

The Arrogance of those who would be gods!  
With a handful of paper, they ascend Olympus.

DR. SEGAL

There are those on the committee who lack faith;  
All Mediocrities, filling their tenured bellies.  
What is truly worth doing, unless there is danger?  
What is truly worth loving, unless it can harm?

They tell me soldiers in the midst of the battle see as they  
Have never seen before...  
The true colors about them:  
A new sky, new earth;  
And Blood never ran so richly tinted...

SECOND STUDENT (sarcastic)

And with paper, we are made paper:  
Men and Women, all cut from the same sheet.

We, the nameless Survivors of any violent age  
Demand Action!  
Solve our problems for us!  
Action instead of Words: Give us the good things.

No matter how small the problem,  
Retaliation is the only answer.

DR. SEGAL

The toxin, derived from an otherwise harmless plant.  
It works gradually in small concentrations... destroying  
The most basic brain function by increments.

A Beautiful Concept!

THIRD STUDENT

We have no need for more concepts!

DR SEGAL

Amidst the fields of grain the locust fly.  
Below them a feast has been prepared; yet  
The toxin has made them unable to recognize it.

SEGAL (cont.)

And with the connection between desire and object,  
Hunger and food, torn asunder;  
They fly on until they die.

In small quantities, the toxin does not kill.

For humans, the leaves of this plant are useful:  
They have stimulative properties, inducing euphoria;  
Enhancing the memory, vividly... However,

SECOND STUDENT

Think of yourself hungry to the point of starvation  
While seated at a banquet table.

Around you, friends are feasting,  
On your plate is a sirloin steak,  
And you are completely unable to tell the difference  
Between the steak and the plate that holds it.

SEGAL

These effects diminish after a few hours.  
There are no deleterious long-term consequences for humans.

FIRST STUDENT

How do know? You're a chemist!

SEGAL

To Dr. Jane L. Segel-

"It has come to my attention that you have been conducting entomological research. Why? Do you realize the problems this might present in the event that your creatures should escape and contaminate the whole facility? Who authorized this research?"

"It is my understanding that your research proposal stated that you were to isolate an organic toxin that could be used as an insecticide. Not to conduct tests on live insects!"

SEGAL (cont.)

Please remove your materials from this facility, and I will make arrangements for you to conduct your tests elsewhere."

So close to finishing;  
Now, to stop everything and make arrangements  
"To conduct your tests elsewhere"

Idiot!

(SEGAL crumples the letter.)

FOURTH STUDENT

Such a potent insecticide would make a perfect world;  
The weapon of retaliation against nature's excesses.

THIRD STUDENT

Damn Western Culture bullshit!

SECOND STUDENT

The great chemist, you are like a child:  
Remaking the world in the safety of your certainty.

FOURTH STUDENT (to THIRD)

You might as well be mending shoes!

THIRD STUDENT

Mending shoes? Idiot!

SECOND STUDENT

All the Things:  
This is what we worship.  
The Objects of Desire...  
"There are tears for things!"

(To SEGAL, but unheard by her.)

SECOND STUDENT (cont.)

Woman of Iron,  
How are you so much better than me?  
You have the Things!

The Student Body Eternal:  
Seeking Objects of Desire...  
Damned to Desire!

FIRST STUDENT (To SECOND)

It's so easy to hide behind the mask;  
Letting others do the thinking for you.

SEGAL

I've been set up... perhaps, in a political way.  
Even a scientist must be a political animal.

(SEGAL reads from another memo.)

This, more from Chairman Fox:

"The agreement between the department and the trustees for the use of contingent lab space is a tenuous one, and such space is provided to me when it becomes available. Your position at the university is just as tenuous. It will not be in your best interest to create problems for the committee; and it would be wise to await further instructions."

(SEGAL crumples the memo.)

These little men!  
They have built their lives on petty honors and minor publications:  
All the Things – first and foremost, the benefit of having cronies.

Who are they to stand in the way of my discoveries?

I will overcome these and their kind!  
Master and rescind;  
Crumple, tear, shred, and discard;

SEGAL (cont.)

Chew, devour and digest;

Appropriate and incorporate them,  
Into my plans, for my own ends!

My time is not measured in the passing of the hours;  
Or the tapping of raindrops on a window;  
Or the number of ripe vegetables in a garden.

I have been compromised too many times in life!

All pain begins with a violation of trust  
And one is left with only two choices:  
Defeat or resistance!

I choose the latter...

They exist for validation of their eminence;  
So, I will buy them with an idea:  
A profit can be made on selling well-being.  
I will lure them to my web with that promise.  
First, my chairman-

FIRST STUDENT (To SECOND)

Against the advice given her by Chairman Fox,  
Dr. Segal continued her research off campus, in a makeshift  
laboratory.  
Even when proper lab space becomes available,  
Out of pride, she rejected it.  
Then the chairman granted her request for a graduate assistant...  
The most inept and opportunistic he could find.

SEGAL (holding a jar of live moths.)

The Late are weaklings and failures!  
They steal what little free time there is-  
All alike, are they not?  
All the dirty little things!

SEGAL (cont.)

They have the time for that, of course.

(She chuckles.)

Pleasure can not be delayed.

As for the real substance:

The Labors of the Soul;

The Obligations reaching beyond the day-to-day;

Let us say, such things are not of immediate concern.

To be late for destiny is a call for pity;

Pity is the obligation to the "broken wings."

(GRUB leaves the audience, and mounts the stage. She is a young graduate student. She is arrogant, devious, and self-serving. In many ways, she is a younger version of Dr. Segal; but she lacks Segal's monomaniacal drive and bitterness.)

I see... late!

GRUB

Not by my watch.

SEGAL

Never mind, next time, be prompt... that is,  
If you want to retain your assistantship?

GRUB

Anything for the money.

SEGAL

Anything, is that what you said?

GRUB

If it doesn't take up too much time.

SEGAL (smiling)

Grubbing, are you?

SEGAL (cont.)

What if I were to call you Grub? Would that be within reason - After all, you'll be spending a good part of your free time on the ground, sifting through piles of rotting leaves and turning over rocks.

GRUB

I have to get dirty? I didn't sign up for that.

SEGAL

Is that so? I thought I was being sent a graduate assistant, not a plantation mistress.

GRUB

Perhaps, we should talk this over?

SEGAL

Yes, perhaps, we should... Take a seat.

(SEGAL sits down in the chair. GRUB looks around for a second chair.)

On the floor.

(GRUB, amazed, looks at SEGAL.)

GRUB

I think I'll stand.

SEGAL

Suit yourself...  
"Little bird with broken wing..."  
Ever hear that?

GRUB

Sure.

SEGAL

Believe it?



GRUB

I guess so... Why?

SEGAL

Sure you do. "Can not fly, cannot sing..."  
What if you wanted to be a blacksmith?  
Is that a worthwhile goal?

GRUB

Why don't you have more chairs? Everybody has at least two.

(GRUB starts to turn away. SEGAL stands up.)

SEGAL

Fine! ... the classic route to failure: It is the feed the monkey game.  
Give him a cookie and he does a trick; then stop giving cookies.

They're still giving you cookies. Right?

GRUB

Feed the monkey? What are you talking about?

SEGAL

You need the money.

(GRUB pauses.)

GRUB

How long will it take you?

SEGAL

I'm almost finished.

GRUB

And what do I have to do?

SEGAL

I told you...  
You're going to be my "Grubber."

SEGAL (cont.)

Look around you! This is what I need:  
Insects! Hundreds a week!

GRUB

What?

SEGAL

Easy work!  
You gather and sort them. Then we kill them.  
What do you say, Grub?

GRUB

You mean roaches and spiders?

SEGAL

And the likes... Any problem with that?

GRUB

I don't like bugs... Are you sure you can't get more chairs in here?

SEGAL

Didn't you say you need the money, and you have the time.

GRUB

Not that much time!

SEGAL

Sure you do! It's the *feed the monkey game*. Everything has value now. Not a moment is spent without the almighty cookie being the object of every action. It is encouraging to have so much free time...  
What do you say?  
Grub?

GRUB

Don't call me Grub!

SEGAL

If you work for me, I'll call you what I damn well please.

GRUB  
I'm afraid of insects!

SEGAL  
Got stung, didn't you?

GRUB  
What?

SEGAL  
Sure you did. Sit down; I want to show you something...

(SEGAL picks up a ledger book from the desk.)

GRUB  
I'm not the person you're looking for-

SEGAL  
Sit down!

(There is some money paper-clipped to one of the pages in the ledger. SEGAL takes some money from the paper-clip and holds it up to GRUB.)

Look at all this money ...  
Do you want to earn all this pretty paper... Right now?

GRUB  
Sure... Wait, let me think about it

(GRUB looks at her watch.)

SEGAL  
Easy money... For you, quite easy.

(SEGAL holds the money closer. SEGAL hands the money to GRUB. She takes the money with some reservations.)

SEGAL (cont.)

Here, feel it

You'll see ... Now place the money in one hand ...

(SEGAL reaches for a jar of grasshoppers (fake), then takes out a grasshopper and holds it between her fingers.)

Grasshopper, no stingers.

(GRUB is a bit disgusted at the sight of the insect.)

Hold out your hand.

GRUB

Why?

SEGAL

Think of the money! Hold the grasshopper in your hand till I tell you it's time to let him go. Then, you get the money.

GRUB

Is that all?

SEGAL

It's just a grasshopper - No Stingers

(GRUB looks at the money, then the grasshopper. SEGAL takes a cigarette case out of HER coat pocket with the other hand. SEGAL presses the button on the case with her thumb and the case opens.)

Care for a smoke?

GRUB

I don't smoke.

SEGAL

Hold out your hand.

(GRUB slowly reaches out and opens her palm.)

GRUB

This must be a joke ... I mean-

SEGAL (Dropping the grasshopper)

Just don't let him get away... There!

(GRUB scrambles to catch the grasshopper.)

Now, close your hand! ... There.

(GRUB flinches as SEGAL takes a cigarette out of the case and lights it, then returns the case to her pocket.)

You have him now

(SEGAL blows smoke in GRUB's face.)

Don't kill him. We can't have a mess, can we?

(SEGAL looks over GRUB's shoulder.)

Are you sure he's still alive?

GRUB

I feel him! He's moving!

SEGAL

Of course, he's alive

(SEGAL starts smoking the cigarette. She picks up a book and opens it.)

GRUB

How much longer?!

SEGAL

Come now, Grub; let's see you smile.

(GRUB is disgusted, and starting to feel ill.)

GRUB

I can't stand this!

SEGAL

Relax! ... They would send me somebody who was afraid of insects. Naturally... Say, here's a good one: "Little bird with broken wing"-

(SEGAL steps on GRUB's hand as she is trying to contain the grasshopper on the floor, killing it.)

GRUB (looking at hand)

Damn!

SEGAL

I'm afraid you'll have to try again.

GRUB

What are you talking about? I thought we had a deal!

SEGAL

Sit down! I'm talking to you!

(SEGAL stands over GRUB.)

You killed that grasshopper...

GRUB

You killed it!

SEGAL

It'll have to be replaced. Find one just like it. Then you get the money.

GRUB

Where?!

(SEGAL hands her a book from the desk.)

SEGAL

You can read?

(SEGAL snatches the money from GRUB, and then places the book in her hand.)

Find me one. Then the money...

(GRUB wipes her hand on her jeans, then realizes what she is doing.)

It's the feed the monkey game. If nothing is wanted, nothing can be sold. If one believes in nothing, he cannot be deceived. Right?

GRUB

What do you want from me?

SEGAL

A grasshopper.

FIRST STUDENT

That which brings us together can also keep us apart.  
We are afraid of each other; and only human kindness  
Reveals our shortcomings as god or beast.  
It Is obvious to each person here,  
That the other person has inclinations toward  
Harming himself!

FOURTH SUDENT

We are those who would fly into the light!

THIRD STUDENT

The Mediocrities?

SECOND STUDENT

What makes us happy  
Are the things we know we are going to lose.  
It is the way of all good things.

FIRST STUDENT

Science is a battleground littered with broken wings.

ALL STUDENTS

Little bird with broken wing;  
Can not fly, cannot sing:  
Worthless Son of a Bitch!

FIRST STUDENT

Even though you have earned your fate,  
It does not mean I must follow you-  
Your fate must not be mine!

ALL STUDENTS

Worthless Son of a Bitch!

SECOND STUDENT

The buttress of science - a solace for the unsteady.

FOURTH STUDENT

Science is a form of gift-giving;  
A handful are charged with this task each generation.

THIRD STUDENT

A gift, or even better - a Miracle!

CHORUS

Science!

FIRST STUDENT

Science for the Masses!



SECOND STUDENT

The man of the middle ages still walks among us;  
Or rather, he drives ...  
The internal combustion engine is beyond his comprehension; but,  
“Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion.”

FIRST STUDENT

His needs are defined at the moment.

THIRD STUDENT

He takes pride in his primitive perspective:  
I move rapidly because of my advanced gonads!

FOURTH STUDENT

The car has become my adornment.

FIRST STUDENT

Ritual has become a science;  
Objects become numbers;  
Men become Objects in a process that generates new numbers;  
And the numbers are manipulated to justify a Ritual.

FOURTH STUDENT

Color within the lines!

FIRST STUDENT

It's still *the feed the monkey game!*  
Because it is good? No... Because it is the only way.

ALL STUDENTS

Stay within the lines!

FOURTH STUDENT

No answer is greater than my question.  
The question disguises a grievance.

ALL STUDENTS

What does that mean? We can't afford to be wrong!

FIRST STUDENT (about another Student)

There are moments - a peripheral glimpse -  
When he sees the ultimate objects of desire.  
As the student takes in the heady aroma of exhilaration,  
He is forced to drink the *ippecac* of resignation.  
A Violation of Trust!

ALL STUDENTS

Worthless Son of a Bitch!

THIRD STUDENT

Smash! Bang!  
Then the left jab - Wham!

We force it!  
We live and sleep it!  
It is self-denial! And we love it-  
A trap!

Academia!

FIRST STUDENT

That which has brought us together also keeps us apart.  
We are afraid of each other.

SEGAL

The moths fight me every inch of the way; yet,  
Can still break away... into the flame!

(SEGAL pours out a small beaker of bug parts and a piece of  
paper. She sorts them out with a pair of tweezers.)

This is a product of the academic mindset:  
One must see something simple as a grand puzzle.  
In a sea of millions, we are equally accepted,  
Serve the same function;  
Are interchangeable, and disposable.

Only the work of administration matters.

FOURTH STUDENT

Who are the Academics?

THIRD STUDENT

Those who elevate the sex drive from rolling around in the mud to the cold counterpoint of ideas between the self-castrated?

SECOND STUDENT

Those who turn their career into a substitute child, then destroy it. Destroy themselves! The freewheeling hand of Abraham!

FIRST STUDENT

The memory is short when it comes to remembering dreadful words.

FOURTH STUDENT

I find comfort in absolute vagueness.  
The work obscures dreadful words;

FIRST STUDENT

It is Denial

(The CHAIRMAN of Segal's department enters.)

SEGAL

Well, if it isn't my beloved Chairman.

(Segal picks up a 1000 ml beaker from the desk. It has cookies in it.)

CHAIRMAN

Do you realize how long this project of yours is taking?

SEGAL

Yes! Twice as long as it should.

CHAIRMAN

So, what's the problem?

SEGAL

Have a cookie.

(SEGAL offers the CHAIRMAN the beaker of cookies.)

CHAIRMAN (taken off guard)

Cookies? ... Well, perhaps a little one ... Yes, well ... yes ... Thank you... Surely, with an assistant you can hurry this thing along a little faster?

(The CHAIRMAN takes a cookie from the beaker. SEGAL returns the beaker to the desk.)

SEGAL

You know what you have to do and the time it takes to do it. I can't wait around all day while your special fool is trying to figure out how many ways to catch an insect without touching it.

CHAIRMAN

You're lucky to have any help at all! Why waste time with insects?

(SEGAL looks at her watch.)

SEGAL

Tea time! How about a cup of happiness, your Honor? Something to take away the *chill*?

(SEGAL goes to the tea tray. It has a tea pot, a creamer, sugar dish, and two tea cups with saucers. The CHAIRMAN is perturbed.)

CHAIRMAN

Tea! Why do I get the feeling you're not listening?

SEGAL

Do you take cream?

CHAIRMAN

Why do you always do this?

SEGAL

Cream, or no cream?

CHAIRMAN

Yes! ... No, I mean ... Sugar, no cream - two lumps - Why do you evade me when it comes to telling my side?

SEGAL (Coldly)

When it comes to this project, you don't have a side.

(SEGAL hands the CHAIRMAN the teacup, then picks up her own.)

Here, drink it before it gets cold.

(The CHAIRMAN takes the tea cup.)

CHAIRMAN

How dare you speak to me in that fashion! Damn it!! You're getting too emotional... You should learn before you're forced to learn that the committee is not concerned with your opinions and what you feel.-

SEGAL

How's your tea?

(The CHAIRMAN frowns, then takes a sip. He pauses, then takes another sip. SEGAL sips her tea.)

CHAIRMAN

Strange ... Like peaches ... not really. What is it?

SEGAL

Delightful, isn't it? It comes from a South American plant - Very refreshing! I discovered it while working on my dissertation.

(SEGAL takes a large beaker from the table.)

SEGAL (cont.)

Comes from these leaves ... Here, smell.

(SEGAL places the beaker to the CHAIRMAN's nose.)

SEGAL

Nice ... isn't it?

CHAIRMAN

My feelings do matter!

SEGAL

Ever hear that little rhyme - How does it go?

ALL STUDENTS (whispering)

Little bird with broken wing

Can not fly, cannot sing.

Worthless son of a bitch!

Bitch!

SEGAL

Need I say more?

(SEGAL reaches into a small drawer in the table and pulls out a pair of rubber gloves.)

CHAIRMAN

I know that rhyme! How's the rest of it go?

(SEGAL puts on the rubber gloves, and then removes from the table a small 50ml flask sealed with a rubber stopper.)

SEGAL

Science is a battleground littered with broken wings;

Weaklings and failures in unending supply:

Worthless sons of bitches.

See this, Your Eminence.

SEGAL (cont.)

This compound is derived from the same leaves from which I brewed that delightful beverage. Less than a teaspoon could kill the both of us.

(The CHAIRMAN looks in his teacup with great concern.)

One should be observant... Nature provides us with everything we need, you only have to look for it.

(The CHAIRMAN lifts off the top of the teapot and wafts the vapor rising from the contents.)

CHAIRMAN

What are you doing? Is this some murder-suicide scheme, or have you taken an antidote? How much of this does it take?

SEGAL

The tea? Oh, I'd say at least 50 gallons... in an hour.

(The CHAIRMAN puts the top back on the tea pot.)

CHAIRMAN (frowning)

What about the long term effects?

SEGAL

We'll just have to find out.

(The CHAIRMAN clears his throat.)

CHAIRMAN

I'm not a test subject! I'm sure the Committee wouldn't look kindly – not to mention the legal implications. You violated protocol! Unless, you are poisoning me; and knowing you, Lucretia, that would not be out of character. You are an evil person! You realize that, don't you?

SEGAL

So, you've been sent to spy on me! Is that it, Chairman?

CHAIRMAN

What do you think? Hmm, I just had the most pleasant-

SEGAL

I see; now, you are among equals: mediocrities and filth-mongers!

CHAIRMAN

Perhaps, that's where I belong. It's not your place to say. This is nice. Playing around with psychedelic drugs, are you? Hey, there's mom!

SEGAL

Every time they meet it's a conspiracy;  
Something to be whispered about in dark closets.  
When I first met you, I thought you had some principles...  
Even the vision it takes to stand above the rest...  
Why don't you leave?

(The CHAIRMAN pulls a jar from a box on the floor.)

CHAIRMAN (delighted)

Look!

Such beautiful creatures: *Blattidea* - Domine, dirige nos.  
We know who they are! ... In the darkness;  
Stealing, and copulating...

SEGAL

I told you to get out!

CHAIRMAN (Giddy)

What I see, and what they know are two different things.  
Regardless of the distress that you've been put through,  
You should recognize an opportunity when you see it.  
Tell me more about these leaves.

SEGAL

What do you take me for?



(The CHAIRMAN takes a handful of leaves out of the beaker.)

CHAIRMAN (With evil glee)

This is no ordinary trip, sweetheart.

So, what are they?  
Something from Hell?

... Something to build a fortune from?

SEGAL

Oh, not quite yet... See, I want to make an Impression on you. A reminder to keep this discovery a secret.

CHAIRMAN

There must be some real potential here.

(SEGAL applies pressure to the CHAIRMAN's hand.)

SEGAL

Shut up, sir! You can learn a great deal by listening. Do you think I've been holding out all this time just to have the discovery of a lifetime slip through my fingers altogether? Imagine, if you can, a pill – a little stronger – that could unlock all that is stored away in memory, including the subtleties of sensation. What color is your mother's dress?

CHAIRMAN

A navy blue print with little white puppies-  
Come now, Segel. Let's talk this over. I'm sure there can be a little give and take.

SEGAL

Give and take? Now, you speak of give and take?

CHAIRMAN

Why not? There must be something I can do? A little something -  
Anything?

(SEGAL turns around and faces the CHAIRMAN directly.)

SEGAL

I can not even count the times I have heard that before; but it has to be different for you. You have been in a position to acquire some privileged information... like, who will be awarded tenure. Am I on the list?

CHAIRMAN

No... but, I can see that you're added... that is, if you give me a little something to back it.

SEGAL

Things never change, even in the best of worlds. You'll have it...

(SEGAL gives him a sensual kiss.)

CHAIRMAN

What was that for?

SEGAL

Affect.

CHAIRMAN

Name your price.

FIRST STUDENT

Only with the greatest of minds does power aspire to true evil.  
Behind our most innocent dreams and desires is the  
Spector of our own destructive will - It waits silently.

It transcends the human! Nourished or starved, it  
Continues to Grow!

Great men have been members of committees!  
Cause of death: Self indulgence...  
Like the woodsman hammering at the wedge, and  
Hacking off the naked limbs-

SECOND STUDENT

In bleak February,  
They would cut away that which would bloom again;  
But, spring's unfolding has been forgotten. All is winter and  
Silence for a year - for the years.

Some say it was poisoned.

THIRD STUDENT

There is a fine line between delusion and insanity.

FOURTH STUDENT

The demented man, and his comfort:  
Holding a handful of ashes and shouting,  
"I am right! Even though it doesn't matter,  
I am right!!"

THIRD STUDENT (jesting)

Gather up the ashes from the bonfire.  
I will fetch a wheelbarrow!

SECOND STUDENT

It was poisoned-

FIRST STUDENT

Poison, indeed! The Tree of Life was poisoned.  
We are all poison makers,  
And in the end, we ourselves,  
Drink of our own cup.

SEGAL (tripping)

There are those who would like to be children again,  
And abandon the thicket of a brutal world.

There are those who dream of swimming in cool streams,  
To climb to the tip of an ancient oak,  
To collect small stones and butterfly wings.

A child again, to see that peripheral glimpse of heaven

SEGAL (cont.)

In the first falling snowflakes outside a frosted window.

So simple it was!

Memory, such a splendid device.  
How easily we are tricked into redressing the past.  
The pain of the child is locked away, assumed discarded.

Yet, in its chrysalis it waits in silence...

Then, without warning, it breaks free;  
Now to fly into the light of our consciousness.  
Each hour it gnaws at the fabric of sanity.  
It's wings beat out the rhythm for the daily dervish  
Who thinks himself happy with his appointment book filled.

He passes out his business cards;  
He has a different pair of shoes for each day of the week;  
And in his mind's eye he sees the child.

The child of memory:  
He could have played in the grassy field till a harvest moon  
Rose above the trees, and here too dream of the great deeds he'd  
Do when he would be a man.

(GRUB drops a pair of scissors. SEGAL turns around.)

Hush, hush, we are listening!  
Hear the beating of their wings-  
Anxiety behind the window, trying to get in.  
I see myself at the top of a hill.

Behind me, at the bottom of this hill, runs a stream.  
Beyond that is a thickly wooded forest infested with ticks;  
And then the wetlands with its sinkholes and bogs.

I can see it, Grub!

SEGAL (cont.)

In front of me stands a tumble-down barn,  
And a tumble-down house,  
Abandoned for more than a generation.

Grandfather's farm will soon fade away:  
Consumed by the earth, which in time,  
Will consume us all.

But in my girlhood, I spent many a summer's day  
Wading through that stream and climbing those post oaks,  
All alone.

Barefoot and half-naked - natural,  
Hacking away the undergrowth with a bush ax;  
I notched markings on the trees,  
So as not to get completely lost;  
And dug holes with a spade to locate grubs-

GRUB

Even then? Really? You're just tripping.  
You shouldn't be drinking that tea.  
It makes you think with your mouth.

SEGAL

It's quite harmless!

How dare you?  
Stop questioning my judgement!

You don't understand me, do you Grub?  
I bet you think I am incapable of any true feeling:  
Some heavy heartless stone you must carry as punishment.

GRUB

I don't care what you are... But, you seem to care what you are.

SEGAL

I am Jane!

GRUB  
Me Tarzan-

SEGAL  
My time is not measured by the passing of days;  
Or the tapping of raindrops on a window;  
Or the number of ripe vegetables in a garden.

GRUB  
No kidding-

SEGAL  
I am complete and self-motivating!

GRUB  
So is a tractor.

SEGAL  
Enough of this chit-chat. You're not being paid for your opinions...  
By the way, what about the *Proprium Supra*? Did you find it?

GRUB  
No! Not yet...

SEGAL  
What about the traps? Did you check all the traps?

(GRUB brings over a box with jars of live moths.)

GRUB  
Yes! Are you sure there is such a thing? I can't find it in any of the books.

SEGAL  
I had such a thing, Grub. It was the Queen of Moths! When I was a child, I would catch hundreds of them.

(GRUB unloads the box on the desk.)

SEGAL (cont.)

A length of three inches in wingspan;  
White with red and black markings;  
And an oval of purple in the center of its back:  
I see it as clearly as I see my own hand.

(GRUB laughs.)

GRUB

The "Segal Moth", is that what they'll call it?

SEGAL

They can damn well call it what they please. The name is *Proprium Supra*, that's all that matters.

(GRUB takes a jar of moths out of the box.)

GRUB

Look! I found them in the traps-  
So beautiful! A Poplar Tentmaker - *Ichthyura inclusa*; and a  
Penitent Underwing - *C. piatrix* - marbled forewings with sienna  
and umber, streaked with black and patches of indigo; hindwings  
radiate with yellow ocher and brown.

SEGAL

He will make a fine addition to my collection.

(GRUB takes out another jar. GRUB's face lights up with pride.)

GRUB

Now, my prize! ... *Diacrisia virginica*...

SEGAL

The Yellow Woolly Bear. I remember as a girl placing them on the  
tip of my finger and watching them wander in endless circles  
around my hand.

GRUB

So, this is how ends its course:

GRUB (cont.)

Once, ungainly and absurd; now, transformed with graceful wings.  
It takes its place in the light.

SEGAL

I see you've lost your fear. You can take pleasure in your work.

GRUB

I don't enjoy killing them.

SEGAL

It will come, in time; killing has its place.

GRUB

You love something, then you cancel it out. And you who kill all of them? Why?

SEGAL

Respect, fool! What do you think? For you, it is money; and for me, it is respect.

In the end, we must all earn our chairs on the committee.  
Even the meak willed succumb to the thirst for power-  
The price is paid by the death of something small and defenseless.

(SEGAL sips the tea.)

Your task is easier. With money, you can buy the respect of trash, tin horns, the distracted and the desperate, ill-informed and the illiterate; but not the respect from those worthy of respect.

My tea is cold; pour me another cup.

GRUB

You've had enough.

SEGAL

I'll be the judge of that.



SEGAL (cont.)

Pour me another cup!

(GRUB fills SEGAL's tea cup from the teapot.)

I hope you're taking notes. If this tea is not as harmless as it seems, you must make a report to the committee.

GRUB

I thought you were sure it safe?!

SEGAL

Just in case.

(SEGAL sips the tea.)

I must save time... They would never approve human tests – not by me, at least. No, they would push me aside. They would make a fool of me! I told the chairman that the shamans of the Amazon had chewed these leaves for untold generations with no ill-effect. I promised it would be safe. Yet, that is based upon hearsay, not empirical proof.

GRUB

I sure the shamans didn't ingest it in as high a dosage as you. It makes you drunk. Is that what the world needs? Another way to get drunk? Does it make you sick?

SEGAL

I feel fine!

GRUB

Suit yourself.

(SEGAL gulps down the contents of the tea cup.)

SEGAL (Waiting for the effects)

There! ... Now, in a few seconds I will see again. Yes! ... One summer day in the woods. Not a soul for miles, only a cool breeze -

SEGAL (cont.)

Perhaps, when I was only seventeen ...  
Yes, I remember that day!

SEGAL

Ah, Grub, if only you could see and feel, the drug brings the  
shadows of the past into bright sunlight!

GRUB

So, it is a drug!

SEGAL

No, a poison! All drugs are poisons:  
An instrument of retaliation against nature's excesses,  
Designed and approved by nature.

My senses are awakened from the day-to-day,  
And there I live again, the girl of seventeen,  
Reclined bare-breasted like an Indian maiden  
Who might live along the unspoiled Amazon.

My shirt is spread over the course bark of a fallen oak  
That I have made my couch... and with eyes closed,  
I rest in the freedom of my innocence.

I remember what I was thinking to myself at that moment,  
Not as I remember, but as if those thoughts were mine at  
this moment.

Outside the girl of seventeen, yet at one with her...

Think of the beauty of it, Grub!  
Youth in a teacup.  
Not an illusion!,  
But the thing itself.

GRUB

For you, it is!

GRUB (cont.)

Your world has always been you alone.  
Alone in your realm of Things.

The thought that others share this same existence is beyond  
your comprehension.  
Alone with the Earth-pleasures:  
To be consumed in self-satisfied numbness!  
What happen to your lover?

SEGAL

Grub, did you know some people are like trees.  
You pass them by without a second thought...  
Then they're gone... Isn't this how we want it?

GRUB

Is that what happened? I don't really care

(GRUB looks at her watch.)

It's 5 o'clock Friday, April the third-

SEGAL

What are you talking about?

GRUB

I get the weekend off.

SEGAL

Yes, that's what I said, didn't I. Well, I suppose you'll need extra  
money... well?

GRUB

The amount we agreed on.

(A pause. SEGAL takes the ledger from the table. She counts  
out some money. A pause. She drops the money on the floor  
and walks back to her chair.)

SEGAL

Why don't you buy some ambition with that? I'm sure it will do you good.

GRUB

Tell it to the committee.

(GRUB exits.)

FIRST STUDENT (to SEGAL)

It is unfortunate that Grub is too naïve to recognize all the procedural and ethical boundaries you have crossed – not to mention, common sense.

It is unfortunate that you have been too intoxicated, even from the beginning, to realize the same.

The shaman warned you about that plant, but you listened to the Frenchman. Remember, he turned you on to it; and might I add, turned you on... What ever happened to him? Oh, he disappeared into the forest. You've never stopped drinking your tea since that time.

SEGAL

Your touch is comforting.  
The eyes say more to me than I can ever understand.  
Visions of a stone dropped into a pool:

Like seeing small, delicate rings forming one within another;  
Then another, and it goes on  
Till there!

And no more... No more. He's gone...

The wells are dry.  
No more tears for me!

I am unable to wipe the hurt away,  
When there is no cloth left unstained.

(The FOURTH STUDENT puts on glasses with large compound eye lenses, and mounds that stage carrying an oversized syringe.)

It's time for your injection, Dr. Segel.

SEGAL

You mean pills?

FOURTH STUDENT

Just a pill to make you sleep... Bedy-bye,  
You must be tired after such a full day.  
Tomorrow, we will be having something I know you'll like;  
Something quite special!

SEGAL

Direct application to the skin,  
Intramuscular Injection,  
Injection, using a mixture of one part per thousand-

FOURTH STUDENT

Just what the doctor ordered.

SEGAL

Am I a test subject?

FOURTH STUDENT

Come now, Dr. Segel, you must be rested,  
The poison you ingested was quite potent.  
We know very little about its nature, but  
I wouldn't say you're being tested.

SEGAL

Your name is Dr. Auzenne, isn't it?

FOURTH STUDENT

You remembered!

SEGAL

The desire of the self with regard to objects which are other human beings remains the same, does it not?

FOURTH STUDENT

I assure you, I am not writing a paper on your illness!

SEGAL

I must cancel you out!

(The FOURTH STUDENT exits into the audience.)

Last week-

No, it was yesterday...

Make a note of this!

Yesterday, or maybe, tomorrow; or at least, February,  
I ingested a concentrated dosage of the toxin.

The dreams blend with the real.

I may be dreaming all this now... this-

I wake up...

(She looks at her watch.)

Yes, it is 1 o'clock... raining...

(She looks in a compact mirror.)

... At least, she looks like me.

(The CHAIRMAN mounts the stage, holding a file folder.)

CHAIRMAN

Good news! Quite promising, in fact. My connections in the industry are interested. Could fetch double the price after production. Could have therapeutic applications! Think of the fortune we'll make!

SEGAL

What are you talking about?

CHAIRMAN

The toxin!

SEGAL

What about it?

CHAIRMAN

After reading your report, my eyes were opened. I recommended to the committee – and may I add, not without some gnashing of teeth – that your project receive the utmost attention. At this time, our department could use a major discovery.

SEGAL

What report?

CHAIRMAN

The report you sent? This is wonderful... Just, truly stupendous!

SEGAL

When did I send you a report?

CHAIRMAN

Last week ... Don't you remember? You must be working too hard, Not getting enough sleep. I've increased the hours for your assistant.

SEGAL

Grub!

(The CHAIRMAN exits. GRUB enters through the main aisle. The STUDENTS come from their various positions in the audience to join her. When she reaches the stage, she turns to address the audience.)

GRUB

Honored chairman; ladies and gentlemen of the Committee:

GRUB (cont.)

Due to Dr. Segel's prolonged illness,  
I have been asked to deliver this paper in her absence.

SEGAL

Everybody likes you, don't they?

Funny how it would be if it were the other way around:  
If I were on my knees picking up pieces of green paper!

GRUB

As you might recall, she took ill before completing her work.

SEGAL

Poisoned!

GRUB

Yet, in the three years since she was forced to abandon her life's  
work-

SEGAL

No! I haven't abandoned a thing! The moths are dead; but, I took  
the antidote. The antidote works!

FIRST STUDENT

What antidote?

FOURTH STUDENT

Socrates did this experiment, too.

SECOND STUDENT

"Stopping at one part per hundred-Was going for twenty-two" This  
was the last entry on page 78.

(GRUB exits. The STUDENTS come to the edge of the stage.)

SEGAL

Yesterday, I watched a man cut down a dead tree,  
From my window I looked across the lake.



SEGAL (cont.)

The man used a chainsaw - The sound ... the sound was

(She blinks her eyes and inhales.)

He used a wedge and sledge hammer to split the wood!

His hammer would fall,  
Across the lake - Water reflecting, reflecting sound!  
His hammer would fall and silence; then the clang of  
Steel against steel as his hammer was ascending...

It was like the feeling one gets when one tries to  
Force like poles of two magnets together:  
Repulsion!

Sound and vision disjointed: following... like  
I am above myself. Outside my being: both swinging the  
Hammer and floating on the water and through the air!

The woodsman brings the hammer high above;  
Sends it crashing down on my head  
Smashing it like a pumpkin,  
As I recline half-naked on a log... Blood spews,  
My limbs dissolve into its limbs

Then I wake up!

(She wrings her hands.)

From time to time I dream that I have killed somebody-  
Perhaps, a child-  
And buried the body in a field.

I think I have awakened from the dream,  
Then fear it wasn't a dream.

The terror of the moment is overwhelming!  
Then I wake up.

SEGAL (cont.)

It was me!

SECOND STUDENT

We saw you digging a hole in the field!  
Digging a little grave for your childhood self.

SEGAL

Did you find my body?

FOURTH STUDENT

No...

SEGAL

It was a dream... but what did it mean?

(The STUDENTS unroll a bolt of muslin.)

THIRD STUDENT

You must return to the chrysalis.  
And in silence, relive your youth.  
But the world will continue its relentless motion,  
Till three years are past and your career is shattered.

SECOND STUDENT

Others will claim your work in your absence.

FIRST STUDENT

In time you'll be forgotten,  
An aged spinster in a rented room,  
All your ambition dissolved and dispersed.

ALL STUDENTS

Little bird with broken wing,  
Can not fly, cannot sing,  
A worthless old bitch in a feather bed,  
Marking time until you're dead!

SEGAL

I am Jane!

FIRST STUDENT

Alone, and in the darkness you stand;  
The shadows of times past - you are Jane,  
Queen of Moths.

THIRD STUDENT

Jane, the child, abandoned!

SECOND STUDENT

A critique worthy of a tombstone; but  
Who will offer a cock to Asclepius for her?

(The STUDENTS mount the stage, and slowly start to wrap her  
in the cloth, making her appear like a chrysalis is forming  
around her.)

FIRST STUDENT

Now see your past again, all that you crave,  
A youthful beauty damned to remember - It is you!

(SEGAL looks to some distant point as the STUDENTS wrap  
her in cloth.)

SEGAL

Reclined on the fallen oak,  
Bare-breasted in the summer sun,  
As the young woodsman wades in the river.

His pant legs rolled up to the knee,  
And I laugh at him... Alone together,  
We spent that summer.

A strong man with curly dark hair,  
His simple ways were a joy for me.

I remember his reflection!

FOUTH STUDENT

His face!

SEGAL

Yes! ... He smiles so gently. I could have had seen this if I weren't so arrogant... or afraid!

SECOND STUDENT

Of what?

SEGAL

Of weakness!

FIRST STUDENT

Have him now, and for three years more.  
Every hospital will have a wedding bed.

THIRD STUDENT

And when you've awakened,  
You will swear he is real.  
A new past will emerge from the chrysalis,  
And you will fly on, into the light.

FOURTH STUDENT

And there be consumed by the flame-  
A flame kindled by your own hand!

(The STUDENTS complete the wrapping. After that, that flank  
her on both sides.)

FIRST STUDENT

Jane the child, abandoned!  
To our dreams and memories, we commit such time  
As to blot out the life we are presently living.  
She perfected this to an art.

Dr. Segel the damned!

And we too, scholars and philosophers,

FIRST STUDENT (cont.)

Damned to spend what little time remains scribbling!

With each passing hour I feel my strength waning; but  
Each blow of my hammer falls heavier - Smashing,

Shattering these old statues ... What statues?  
And the buttress of Science has been cast into the depths...  
What hammer?

I must heal myself... of life's affliction!

The buttress of Science: a solace to the unsteady.  
The word of the Committee: a license for the criminal.  
These are the accomplishments of noble institutions?

Nature, the mother of wisdom, spits on us!  
These stones of her defilement returned as a venomous sting:  
Monuments built to expediency and desk-murder!

The ape in his professorial robes!

And what of the idealism of our youth?  
Has it too been smashed to pieces?

I am confounded with the imponderable concepts - rubbish!  
So weighted down with them, I feel misplaced...  
When I held knowledge, it burnt my flesh... In its absence,  
I am chilled... Painfully!

THIRD STUDENT

All is turned to paper-

SECOND STUDENT

I scribble the words on paper... That which I remember...

FOURTH STUDENT

It has always lived for me in tears: lost tenderness and dreams.  
To see and not understand - To touch and not to feel.

THIRD STUDENT

What will they write about me?

FIRST STUDENT

I saw him at sunrise and he was tired?  
He spoke of yesterday and what he was unable to lose?  
He persisted in his quest for that which he couldn't have?  
He dissolved into darkness... alone...

GRUB (from a distance)

Let them say what they please!

FIRST STUDENT

With what time remains, I will use my hammer as a scalpel:  
Dissection of a life as a curative method... Let me cut!  
Let me scrap away the dead tissue with my curette until I see  
Life as is ...

The dead tissue of the day-to-day removed!

FOURTH STUDENT

No longer alone, and  
In the Light?

ALL STUDENTS

"Little Bird with Broken Wing;  
Cannot Fly, Cannot Sing;  
Worthless Son of a Bitch!"

(End)